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Pride Overcometh

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

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Pride Overcometh

Abstract

A couple weeks ago I got the chance to wave to Ben Franklin and Mark Twain. They waved back from the stage as the curtain dropped. Jess leaned in to me. "I didn't realize that *this* is what history is to you," she said, with a bit of derision in her voice. I understand my wife's derision. Disney World is not the first place that comes to mind when most people think of powerful and meaningful history. But for me, it *is* where I began to find the magic in history. [*excerpt*]

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Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Pride Overcometh

THURSDAY, MAY 15, 2014

A couple weeks ago I got the chance to wave to Ben Franklin and Mark Twain. They waved back from the stage as the curtain dropped.

Jess leaned in to me. "I didn't realize that *this* is what history is to you," she said, with a bit of derision in her voice.

I understand my wife's derision. Disney World is not the first place that comes to mind when most people think of powerful and meaningful history. But for me, it *is* where I began to find the magic in history.

I say magic because that's what history is. History is that moment you can wave to Benjamin Franklin and he waves back. It's that moment you can watch Mark Twain softly knock ashes off of his cigar.

When I was a kid, *that* was embedded in my psyche as the ultimate expression of what history can do. And it's fundamentally what I try to do through my study and interpretation of history. I don't build animatronic figures or construct massive theme parks. But I do try to breathe life into the past for fleeting moments. Those moments are too often so fleeting, tiny whiffs of what the past might have been like. But when the stutter of the authentic experience, the reality of yesterday, seeps through, it's magic. Like waving to Ben and Mark.

And it's not all antiseptic. Ben and Mark, their pneumatic actuators wheezing as they loll in a rocking chair or walk into Jefferson's loft, have a few tricks up their sleeves for the interpreter. *The American Adventure* raises some very potent moments of introspection for the American interpreter.

At an early moment in the show, Mark Twain quips to Franklin, "Well, listen to the proud elder statesman."

And Franklin replies with, as you'd expect, an apropos aphorism: "Mr. Twain, pride is one of our national passions. Even those who overcome it, are proud of their humility."



Sorry, there is nothing on earth that screams "America" louder than Ben Franklin and Mark Twain having a discussion on the torch of the Statue of Liberty at daybreak.
Nothing.

My gears have been turning since I heard that line again. I must have heard that line in that very theatre at least a half-dozen times in my life, at different stages and ages. But it still gets me. The complexity of that moment in the script, when an imagineer chose those words for that pseudo-Franklin, is amazingly powerful to me.

Americans are proud. It is almost the single most powerful defining element of our national character. Americans are a proud people.

But what does pride mean? And what does pride do? Can it poison the story, tilt it? Does pride cause us to trivialize history?

Maybe. Perhaps our pride clouds our collective perceptions of the past. Americans have good ideas, make good decisions, craft good inventions. Might our pride make us less likely to investigate the ideas of our forebears? Might pride make us less likely to doubt the wisdom of the decisions our ancestors made? Might that pride mean we embrace outdated innovation simply because it's our own ingenuity? Does pride mean we are inherently biased from the start?



It has always boggled my mind that many of the same Americans who embrace and display the Confederate flag proudly and (sometimes) defiantly also underline their stalwart patriotism and pride in the Stars and Stripes. Perhaps even love of the Confederate Flag, a symbol of the very antithesis of the United States, is borne of American pride. We are proud of the decisions of Americans. And it was, after all, an American decision to attempt to dismantle America itself.

The Confederate flag argument is a facile one, I know, but it points to the large bias we don't always address. Can Americans ever interpret America, or is exceptionalism always going to haunt our forays into meaning-making because it is embedded in our cultural DNA. Interpretation is about multiple perspectives playing off of one another. But when you have a horse in the race, can you really be an honest broker of all of those opinions?

But maybe there is hope. Remember bionic-Franklin's Americans who are, "proud of their humility." What if we can harness our belief in exceptionalism and use it as our very window of investigation?

Ultimately, there is a major difference between these two types of pride. One, the facile pride of blind flag waving, is simply asserting that America is so good, we could never have made a mistake.

Denying women the right to vote:
another of the sins of the past we must
rededicate ourselves as too good to repeat.

But imagine churning the pride into something else. Imagine a pride that says to each American, in their heart, that America is so good that we must, as a society,

acknowledge, publicize and atone for every moment we've made mistakes in the past. We can shift pride from a blind reaction to a powerful moment for healing and adventuring into a better future.

It's the reason we should never forget crimes like American slavery or Indian removals. Each generation must relive those sins, from now until eternity, precisely because we should be a better nation than that. We should strive to be better than that. We should be proud of a nation that can overcome yesterday's sins today, and avoid them tomorrow.

After all, we aren't making a nation for today. America is the promise of tomorrow. Or as Ben says perched atop the torch of the Statue of Liberty as the sun rises in the east:

"I may have invented these bifocals I'm wearing, but I can assure they are not rose-colored. Mr. Twain, the golden age never was the present age, but with human liberty we can fulfill the promise and meaning of America. To everyone a chance, believed Thomas Wolfe, to all people regardless of their birth, a right to live, to work, to be themselves, and to become whatever their visions can combine to make them. This is the promise of America!"